



That Fellow In The Star-Spangled Underwear

... is a serious actor who still isn't quite convinced he's actually in 'Captain Nice'

It is difficult to imagine two entertainments farther apart than "The Zoo Story," Edward Albee's grim little two-character play, and *Captain Nice*, the broad "Superman" spoof which recently began a run on NBC. But there is a connection, and it may well offer a commentary on what has been happening to actors, to the American theater and to television.

In 1960, an actor named William Daniels got his first big break playing the part of Peter, the prissy

little man who ends up a murderer in "The Zoo Story." His performance not only won awards for Daniels, but it impelled playwright Herb Gardner to help him get the part of the prissy social worker in "A Thousand Clowns"—a part Daniels played on Broadway and in motion pictures.

When Buck Henry, creator of *Captain Nice*, set about finding someone to play his nonhero, he recalled having seen an actor perfect for the part but could not recall where or

in what he had seen him. Then one day he happened to pass a movie theater which was showing "A Thousand Clowns." In one of the stills displayed out front he saw the man he had been trying to find.

Thus did William Daniels go from an award-winning role in a distinguished play to the star-spangled long underwear and bedraggled blue cape of Captain Nice.

The final step in this *hegira* was not an easy one for the 39-year-old actor. When he arrived in Los Angeles from his native New York to make the *Captain Nice* pilot film, he told his parents, who had moved West several years before, "I don't know why I am here—I don't want to do this," but they encouraged him, as they had from the time they started him performing as a small child. His father said, "If you're the actor you think you are, you should be able to do anything, including be a clown." But when Daniels left for New York after completing the pilot, he "forgot" to sign his contract for the series.

After *Captain Nice* was sold, however, he closed up his Riverside Drive cooperative apartment and moved his wife and two small sons to California. His reasons were principally economic. As has been aptly put by an Actors Studio veteran now in Hollywood doing TV guest shots, "You don't get an Edward Albee or Arthur Miller play every week." And William Daniels had the memory of many weeks "at liberty" behind him—those first years after graduation from Northwestern University's drama school, when he got a job every three or four months while his wife made their living performing in soap operas.

It wasn't that way in earlier days. "Things always came to us as kids," Daniels says. By the time he was 6 years old, he and his sister Jackie were a song-and-dance team appearing around New York. Later, joined by their younger sister Carol, they became known as "The Daniels Fam-

ily" and were doing three radio shows a week, with such future celebrities as Ralph Edwards and the late Paul Douglas as announcers.

Recollection of those early days brings a nostalgic smile to the face of the actor's mother, and his father says, "When I look back, I'd like to do it all over again." For William Daniels—although he credits show business with getting his family out of a tough Brooklyn environment—the memories are not so warm: "It was not a normal childhood." His mother took him for tap-dancing lessons when he was barely past 3 years old. As the years and the lessons went on, he taught the routines to his sister because the family could afford only one set of lessons a week on his father's Depression wages as a bricklayer and construction worker.

Daniels' real traumatic experience, though, was the audition for Nick Kenny, a New York newspaper columnist who put on a radio show. When Mrs. Daniels first brought Bill and his sister to the studio, she discovered that the program was not interested in dancers. "Can't they sing?" she was asked. She took the children home and taught them to sing "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" in unison. Back at the studio again, she found that they would have to sing harmony—so home again for lessons in harmony. Finally the big moment came. Before a small studio audience, the children began to sing. "I was off-key right from the start," Bill recalls. "My mother got up from her seat in the audience, walked down the aisle and stood beside me singing until I got on key." Years later, as assistant director of "Gypsy," Daniels saw Ethel Merman come striding out of the audience to re-enact an almost identical situation. "It was a strange sensation, seeing it all happen again," he says.

Daniels went to Northwestern in 1947 after getting out of **continued**

the Army. He met his wife, Bonnie, a fellow drama student, there. He chose to go to college on the advice of Howard Lindsay, co-author and star of "Life with Father," in which he appeared before being drafted in 1945. As a son in "Life with Father" (he eventually played two of them, John and Clarence), the teen-aged Daniels had his hair dyed a bright red. When he was not on stage, he wore a cap pulled down over his ears.

Back in New York after five years—two in the Army, principally in Italy, and three at Northwestern, where he got a B.S. in speech in 1950—Daniels lived through what he calls "the toughest part of my life." He began to lose confidence in himself, eventually did not even like to go to the theater. When he learned that he was being considered for the Ben Gazzara role in the road company of

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A Beauty Hint

Margaret Merrill advises that it is quite simple for every woman to promote an English countryside complexion. Her hint to gain a peaches-and-cream loveliness is to damp a cloth with cold water from your refrigerator and press it over your face for a few minutes once or twice a day. Then to hold the good of the complexion beautifying cold water smooth on a little tropical oil of Olay. This oil is rather scarce and expensive but your drug store should be able to get you a small supply.

Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," he said flatly, "I can't play it." But Williams personally chose him for it, and play it he did.

When "The Zoo Story" came along, he thought he was trying out for the part of Jerry, which went to George Maharis, but it was as Peter that he won the Clarence Derwent and Obie awards. "A Thousand Clowns" followed, then "Dear Me, the Sky Is Falling," "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "On a Clear Day," in which he sang professionally for the first time since childhood. Before *Captain Nice*, he also made a movie, "Two for the Road," with Audrey Hepburn.

It is as the little guy with glasses (which he really does not wear) that Daniels sees himself, although off-stage he can be moody and unpredictable. He identifies *Captain Nice* with his more prestigious forebear in "The Zoo Story" and says, fatalistically, "If the public doesn't buy it, we'll just pack up and go home. I insist upon treating this as a temporary situation."

He, Bonnie, and the two children, Michael, 3, and Robert, 1, live in a furnished San Fernando Valley home rented from Gordon and Sheila MacRae. Bonnie, who did not even know how to drive before moving to California, says she still feels disoriented. Daniels himself likes the movie-business hours ("You feel as if you're driving to the office in the morning"), but he misses the time he used to be able to spend with his family ("As a Broadway actor, you're home most of the day and leave about the time the kids are going to bed. Now when I get home, it's their bedtime").

Three-year-old Michael is precocious. Upon leaving a room, for instance, he will say, "Exit—stage left." When something like this happens, his mother says, "Where did he learn that?" and his father says, "Oh, my God!" As for Grandma—who started training young Bill when he was Michael's age—her eyes light up.